

2
 ARTICLE APPEARED
 ON PAGE A-27

WASHINGTON POST
 7 June 1985

5
 3
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Comandante Zero . . .

ON THE SAN JUAN RIVER, Nicaragua—Eden Pastora, fabled and much maligned guerrilla leader, is operating on the Nicaraguan side of this river where his impoverished men are daily fighting and dying against Managua's Marxist forces.

Those facts are based on our personal observations, contradicting accusations that Pastora is a pure propagandist based in Costa Rica—perhaps in collusion with his former Sandinista comrades.

But Pastora has been far less successful than the main body of contras on the Honduran border, the Nicaraguan Democratic Front (FDN), in finding private and foreign government sources to replace the long-suspended U.S. subsidy. He is short of everything: weapons, ammunition, boots, food, medicine. His is literally an army in rags.

Pastora was frozen out by the CIA long before Congress cut the supply lines. Yet, he is the best known leader of the anticommunist resistance, the legendary Comandante Zero who captured the National Palace in 1978 to begin the end for Anastasio Somoza. He evokes unmatched emotion on the streets of Managua and attracts young *campesinos* into the jungle for a life of privation.

Why then is he a wasted resource? U.S. officials respond that he is a leftist under the skin who does precious little fighting. "The CIA is fooling the president of the United States," Pastora replied to us. "I would like to see the president so that I could say to him, 'These people are lying to you, Mr. Reagan.'"

That Pastora is fighting under exceptionally difficult circumstances was brought home to us when two guerrillas were killed and one of his best platoon leaders severely wounded 50 kilometers from here.

Nearly all the wounded in Pastora's Democratic Revolutionary Alliance (ARDE) die for lack of medical evacuation. But Fausto Lopez, 29, shot in the belly, was brought down the river in a small, slow motorboat to the shack that passes for a hospital. The doctor (Pastora's older brother), lacking antibiotics and plasma, could merely give Lopez a pain killer. He was taken across the border to Costa Rica and, after a long, bumpy jeep ride, was picked up by a Red Cross ambulance.

Pastora claims 7,000 men under arms, occupying 10,000 square kilometers, contesting for 33,000 more and controlling 140 kilometers of the river. These figures were impossible for us to substantiate. But we could personally attest to the inaccuracy of FDN claims that Pastora operates out of San Jose, Costa Rica, with no more than 200 men.

We saw 400 men at the Nicaraguan jungle airstrip where we arrived. But they are in deplorable condition. A few are barefoot; many lack weapons; some carry antique World War II-vintage rifles and all are short of ammunition. Aside from river shrimp and wild monkeys, food is hard to come by.

ARDE officers say Nicaraguan peasants in the interior provide plenty of food for Pastora's guerrillas. If maps at his command post bear any resemblance to reality, the airport guard is but a small portion of his army. Pins show Pastora's forces contesting all over the southern half of Nicaragua.

Pastora bitterly reacts to accusations he is a Marxist tool blocking an FDN southern front: "If we had gotten as much money from the CIA as the FDN, we would be in Managua today." He contends CIA operatives ("the geniuses from Harvard") cut him off when he opposed U.S.-Nicaraguan negotiations.

While Pastora praises private enterprise, a picture of Augusto Sandino hangs over his cot. He bristles at calling the Managua regime "Sandinista" and always labels it "communist," adding: "Sandino was never a communist. He was a nationalist—like Senator Helms."

Jesse Helms has become a convert to Comandante Zero. He and four other conservative Republican senators have asked that one-third of any new congressional funding go to Pastora.

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